

Union Squared

WORKING HIS WAY UP AT MEADOWOOD



From dishwasher to executive banquet chef, Alejandro Ayala made learning the kitchen, not earning a title, his top priority



Courtesy Alejandro Ayala 1986

Alejandro Ayala moved to California at age 18, above, to pick crops in the Central Valley. When he heard about a dishwasher position at Meadowood, he saw it as an opportunity and did more than clean up, offering to help out the chefs, who started to teach him. His drive paid off.

Photos by Meadowood

By Sarah Adler

Alejandro Ayala, the estate chef in charge of all banquet operations at Meadowood, one of the most elegant resorts in Napa Valley, looks at home in the lap of luxury. The former country club is a far cry from Ayala's childhood in Indaparapeo, in the Michoacan state of Mexico. After his father died, his mother raised nine children on her own, waking up each morning at 4 to prepare breakfast for the family before beginning her shift as a seamstress.

"To help out, I started working when I was 8 years old — stocking vegetables at the market to earn enough to put myself through high school, money for the bus, books and my uniform," he said. "I also helped out in the kitchen and took to it."

At 18, he moved to California to pick grapes and other crops in the Central Valley. When he heard about a dishwasher position at Meadowood, he jumped at the opportunity and the rest is history. "In between loads (of dishes), I kept an eye on the whole kitchen — grabbing the garbage, sweeping the floor and would always ask the cooks, 'What can I do for you?'" Before long, French chefs began teaching him knife techniques, how to prepare vegetables and other dishes. "I was still a dishwasher, but I didn't let my pride and ego get in the way," says Alejandro. "Learning is more important than a title."

After a year, he was told that if he could find a replacement, he could leave his dishwashing position and move up to prep cook. He did. He was later promoted to sous chef and, finally, executive banquet chef, a position he has held since 1998. Now 45, he also serves as head chef for Harlan Estate, Bond Estates and the Napa Valley Reserve, managing a team of 80 and regularly preparing meals for two up to 1,000. At the annual Napa Valley Wine Auction (which used to serve 2,500

revealing about couples, and he gets a sense of the couple by their selections. Tastings and menu preferences bring out aspects of people's personalities and the dynamics of the relationship. He's witnessed trends like the evolution from butter to olive oil, the trend for less bread on the table and a reduction in portion size. "We used to serve a huge piece of 14 ounce steak, but now we butcher the beef and do small cuts or create cylinders to look nice on the plate."

Alejandro, now considered a mentor in the same kitchen where he started washing dishes, credits Meadowood with helping him "grow up," and he now guides budding young talent. "Be an advocate for yourself. Ask questions and whenever you have the chance to learn, take it,"

he often tells his team. "I never said no to an opportunity, and I am always open to suggestions."

For his own wedding to Delia, a supervisor in the Meadowood wine and cuisine department, at Spring Hill in Napa Valley last July, he planned a buffet-style banquet and prepared everything the day before including beef tenderloin, fingerling potatoes, halibut, asparagus and various salads. Among the 150 guests were his two adult children (one of whom also works at Meadowood) from his first marriage. Even with his success, Alejandro often reflects on his upbringing with his mother, who moved to California to live with him more than a decade ago.

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Alejandro Ayala, Meadowood executive banquet chef

meals), he is in charge of all the prep work for the guest celebrity chefs and has worked with Thomas Keller, Emeril Lagasse, Jacques Pepin, Nancy Oaks and many others.

Wedding season is a favorite time of year, and he looks forward to preparing for the big day — estimating that he's cooked for about 750 celebrations — meals for 50 to 350 guests. "I love sitting down with a couple during the tasting," Alejandro says, who usually meets with them three months in advance to review the details. "They are really happy, and we discuss everything from ingredients to presentation."

Menus, Alejandro said, are



Alejandro has held the position of executive banquet chef since 1998. In that time, he estimates he's cooked for about 750 celebrations.

"My dad used to tell my mom: 'When all the kids are grown up, you are going to travel around visiting them, you're going to drive a car, and they are going to take care of you,'" says Alejandro, who, like his mother, thought his father was crazy with those predictions. "I came from a really poor

family where we barely had enough to eat. Turns out my dad was right. We are both living the dream we always wanted."

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